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EDUCATION WEEK

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Study Challenges 'All or Nothing' View of Dyslexia

Study Finds Severity of Disability Varies Widely

By Debra Viadero

A new study of Connecticut schoolchildren challenges the traditional view of dyslexia as a permanent disability that is easily distinguishable from other kinds of reading problems children encounter in their elementary-school years.

Rather, researchers at the Yale University School of Medicine have concluded, the disability, like hypertension or obesity, varies in severity.

Children considered to be dyslexic in the 1st grade may no longer fit the same classification two years later, they said. Conversely, children who are not seen as dyslexic early on may qualify for special help in reading as they grow older.

"It does seem dyslexia is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon," said Robert Makuch, an associate professor of public health at Yale University School of Medicine and one of the study's authors. "What this also implies is that children need constant monitoring as they progress through grade school."

The World Federation of Neurology defines dyslexia as a disorder "manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence, and sociocultural opportunity."

Children with the disorder sometimes transpose letters or have difficulty matching sounds to the letters or groupings of letters they see on a page.

The disability affects an estimated 10 percent of all schoolchildren, and, in recent years, it has been assumed to have a biological basis.

In the study, published Jan. 16 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the researchers described their effort to track 414 randomly selected Connecticut children from when they entered kindergarten in 1983.

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Also in the news

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The Rochester, N.Y., teachers' union is urging administrative cutbacks to close an $8.5-million budget gap.

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Texas school officials levy heavy fines on the publishers of error-ridden history textbooks.

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As the Congress gets back to work this week, a fierce partisan battle looms over education policy.

Indians Go on Offensive To Fight Alcohol's Effects

By Peter West

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—For James Robideau, combating the ill effects of fetal alcohol syndrome on another generation of Native American children is as much a question of cultural survival as it is a personal commitment.

At a recent seminar on the disorder, Mr. Robideau, a tribal lawyer for the Oglala Sioux who lives on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, watched as participants began to realize how F.A.S. had become woven into the fabric of their lives.

"They talked about the children that they have raised before any of them had become aware of F.A.S.—we've only become really aware in the last two to three years—and they said, 'Now, I understand. That's my grandson,' " he said.

Mr. Robideau and his wife, Karen, who teaches at the nearby Oglala Lakota College, are intimately familiar with the effects of F.A.S., a preventable form of mental retardation linked to maternal drinking during pregnancy. The couple's adopted child suffers from the malady, and they have opened a shelter in their home for other afflicted children.

But Mr. Robideau knows, too, that some experts on the Pine Ridge Reservation estimate that F.A.S. and a related, slightly less serious disorder called fetal alcohol effect are believed to afflict as many as 25 percent of the children born there.

And that means, he says, that scores of other youngsters on the reservation will enter school at a disadvantage and that, without intervention, the odds are good that the cycle of abuse and alcoholism among the Sioux will be perpetuated.

Mr. Robideau is not alone in his concerns. The recently released report of the U.S. Education Department's Indian Nations At Risk Task Force quotes Roberta Ferron, a Sioux lawyer and the associate director of the affirmative-action office at the University of Washington, as saying that she is "convinced that we [must] . . . halt [F.A.S.] . . . or we will cease to exist as Indians."

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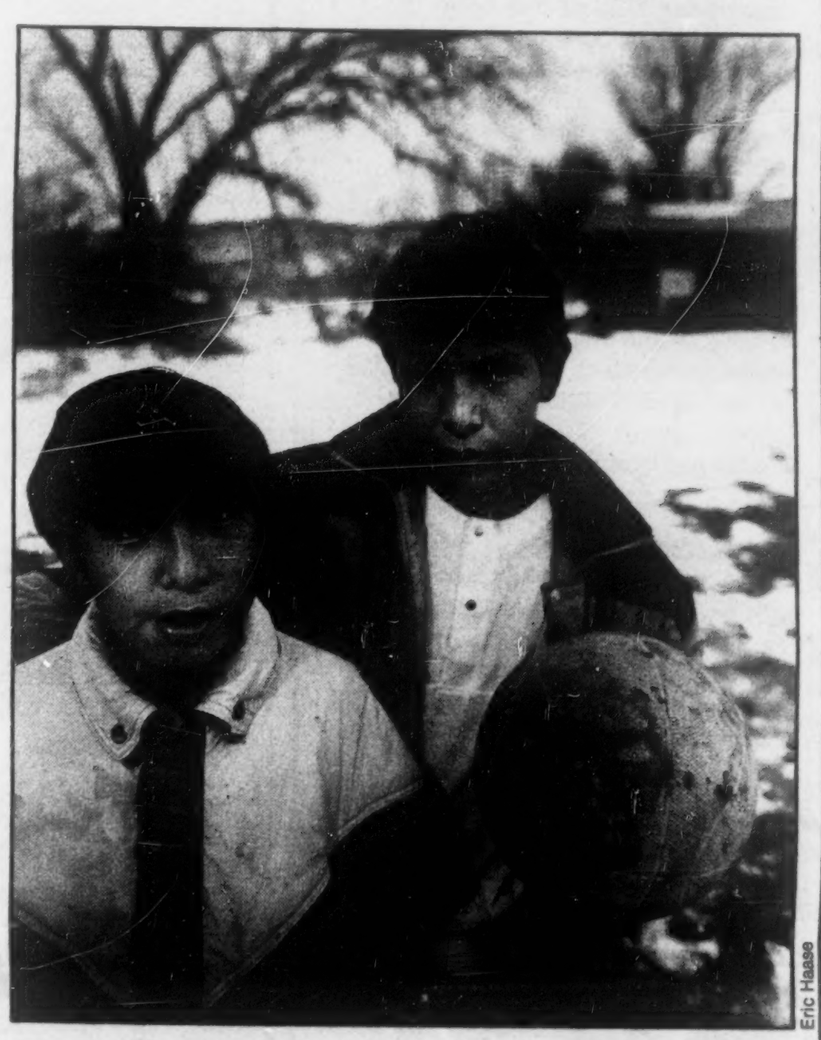

Eric Haase

Rondell Charging Crow, 10, left, and his brother, Justin, 14, at the Robideaus' shelter on the Pine Ridge Reservation for children afflicted with F.A.E. and F.A.S.

N.Y. District Fears Fiscal Disaster In Wake of Nuclear Plant's Closing

By Peter Schmidt

WADING RIVER, N.Y.—To critics, the massive nuclear-power plant near here is a dangerous boondoggle that could threaten the lives of thousands of Long Islanders and that has cost billions of dollars while never providing any electricity to consumers.

To the schoolchildren who live in its shadow, though, the Shoreham Nuclear Power Station has seemed until recently almost like a savior.

Thanks to the millions in property taxes paid each year by the nuclear plant, schools here in the largely middle-class Shoreham-Wading River Central School District have been among the wealthiest in the nation.

The district spent $17,435 per pupil last year, more than any other district in the state and easily double the $7,700 state average. It boasts of 1 teacher for every 10 students and provides children with easy access to things that many districts have been forced by the recession to cut back on or go without, such as computers, library books, musical instruments, and art supplies.

But local educators now fear that the impending closing of the nuclear plant may spell disaster for the district.

If, as expected, the state government gets permission from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to buy and close the plant, the district stands to lose nine-tenths of its locally generated revenue.

"We have property wealth because of the power plant. Absent that, we would be property poor," Superintendent David E. Jackson said in an interview.

Without revenues from the plant, the district will have to "significantly" reduce its expenditures and offerings, Mr. Jackson said.

What will remain in the district is a lingering debate over the equity of the state's school-financing system and a memory of the kind of educational programs that well-spent money can buy.

The Shoreham-Wading River district is located about midway along Long Island's north shore. It enrolls a total of 2,000 students in a high school, middle school, and three elementary schools.

The district's mostly middle-class neighborhoods have been nicknamed the "Blue Ghetto" because of the large numbers of police officers who live there.

In recent years, however, the police officers have been outnumbered by teachers, many of whom work in other districts but prefer to send their children to Shoreham-Wading River schools, according to Superintendent Jackson.

This fiscal year, the district will spend about $38.8 million. Some $28 million, or 90 percent of the revenue from local sources, will come from taxes paid by the

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G.E.D., Turning 50, Eyes Debate Over Student Standards

By Robert Rothman

Since World War II, the General Educational Development program has offered more than 12 million high-school dropouts a ticket back into the educational mainstream.

Through tests measuring the "major and lasting outcomes" of a high-school education, the program has issued credentials that employers and college-admissions officials recognize as evidence that G.E.D. graduates meet de facto high-school academic standards.

Now, as the program celebrates its 50th anniversary, educators and policymakers at the national level are on the verge of redefining what it means to be a high-school graduate, as well as how to measure that attainment. Such changes, educators point out, would have a dramatic effect on the G.E.D.

This week, for example, a Congressionally mandated panel is expected to issue a strong recommendation that the United States move toward national standards for student performance and a new system of assessments tied to the standards.

As such standards emerge, said Ramsay W. Selden, the director of the state education-assessment center of the Council of

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IN SUMMARY

Feeling the Financial Pinch
More first-year college students than ever say they chose their postsecondary institution for financial reasons, according to a report released last week.
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Improving Use of the Tube
Thirty years after the advent of instructional television, a new training program aims to help teachers make more effective use of the medium.
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Truant Crackdown
Atlanta police and school officials quietly orchestrated a recent massive sweep of truants that nabbed more than 450 students from city streets, shopping malls, and public-transit stations. **Page 8.**

Conflicting Interests
State laws that require parental notification or consent for an adolescent's abortion are often inconsistent with state laws about medical matters, a new report concludes. **Page 8.**

Offering the Olive Branch
Seeking peace with the new Republican legislative majority and the middle class, Gov. James J. Florio of New Jersey has outlined plans to stimulate the state economy and ease the tax burden. **Page 15.**

Enlisting Business
President Bush and top Education Department officials last week urged local business leaders to take the lead in their communities in implementing the Administration's America 2000 program. **Page 20.**

A Big Blue 'Boondoggle'?
A Democratic lawmaker asserted last week that the federal Blue Ribbon Schools program, now on hold, favors suburban schools over ones with minority enrollments.
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ACROSS THE NATION

NATIONAL

Harris Poll Finds Support for Overhaul of American Education

A poll this month by Louis Harris & Associates has found that a majority of Americans support a vast overhaul of the education system, and that nearly three-quarters of the respondents believe teachers, rather than legislatures or school boards, should enact the reforms.

Sixty-eight percent of those polled said that schools should have greater decision-making power over curriculum and finances, and 74 percent would grant schools more control over what is taught to teachers.

A majority of those surveyed expressed discontent with President Bush's reform efforts. Thirty-six percent called them "only fair," and 26 percent "poor." Meanwhile, 30 percent found them "good," and 6 percent "excellent."

Members of the Congress fared even worse, with 41 percent of those polled calling their work "only fair" and 38 percent "poor."

The Harris poll was commissioned by Scholastic Inc. and published in the Winter 1992 edition of *Agenda*, a quarterly Scholastic publication.

Pediatricians Back Gun Control To Reduce Teenage Injuries, Deaths

The American Academy of Pediatrics said last week that it supports strict gun-control laws in order to reduce the number of teenagers who are injured or killed by firearms.

Adolescents are at particular risk for gun-related injuries, the academy said in a statement last week, because they are immature, have easy access to guns, and are difficult to teach gun safety.

According to the academy, firearms are involved in 70 percent of teenage homicides and 63 percent of teenage suicides. Almost 3,200 youths ages 15 to 19 are fatally shot each year, the group said.

For every firearm fatality, there are at least five nonfatal injuries, the group said.

Nine million adolescents have access to firearms in their own homes, the group said.

To reduce the number of injuries and fatalities, the A.A.P. said it supports efforts to make gun ownership more difficult as well as measures that would ban handguns, air guns, and so-called assault weapons.

It also called on health-care providers to advise their patients to remove guns from their homes and to support violence-prevention education programs.

■ **The National Association of Secondary School Principals last week issued a policy statement supporting parental choice, including private-school choice, if criteria are met that would allow all schools to compete for students on a "level playing field."**

The policy is the first definitive statement on choice by the group, which has expressed doubt about the concept. In it, the group sets out a number of conditions that must exist before it will accept any choice proposal.

All participating schools, the policy says, must "follow the same mandates, including the selection, admissions, and retention of all students; and the licensing and certification of all professional staff."

Said Timothy J. Dyer, the executive director of the 43,000-member group, "Any plan which would allow some schools to select the cream of the student crop and reward those schools with public dollars would be detrimental to our society and opposed by NASSP."

The group also says public funds must not be used to advance religion, and choice plans should not adversely affect the student racial balance of participating districts.

In addition, the policy states, "We do not believe that 'choice,' in and of itself, will improve instruction to the degree necessary to achieve the national education goals." ■

A Family Tradition

For most students, getting a score of 800 on the mathematics portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test is a pipe dream. For Tim Sanders of Milledgville, Ga., it was a family affair.

Tim, a junior at Baldwin High School, attained the perfect score on the test he took in November, continuing a family tradition of perfect math scores that began with his brothers Mark, 24, and Dan, 22. He was one of 1,025 students who achieved a perfect score out of the million students who took the S.A.T. last year.

While he admits he didn't study much for the test, which he took for the fourth time last November, he was relieved he had matched his brothers' marks. "I would have never lived it down if I didn't make it," Tim says.

The Sanders brothers' computational skills seem to run in the genes. Their father, Hugh, is a math professor at Georgia College, and a few uncles and grandparents were engineers.

Elder brother Mark is studying to become a middle-school teacher, and Dan is a graduate student, majoring in some "unpronounceable branch of math" Tim says.

While his brothers have followed the scholarly route, Tim sees another career possibility—one that does not include cartesian graphs and polynomials.

"I don't know if my parents have accepted the fact yet, but I see myself as an actor," says Tim, who recently auditioned for a part in the nonnumerically-inclined play "Our Town."

—S.K.G.

Loel Barr

STATES

Texas Board Weighs Plan Reducing Use of State Student Assessments

The state board of education in Texas is considering a plan that would overhaul the state's system of standardized testing and reduce the number of hours students spend on state assessments.

Students in grades 3 through 11 will spend an average of 8.6 hours being tested this year. Under the plan, proposed by State Commissioner of Education Lionel Meno, that figure would drop to 5.3 hours. Tests would be expanded to cover social studies and science in addition to the current focus on mathematics, reading, and writing.

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills would be given to students in grades 4, 8, and 10, instead of the current practice of testing youths in grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11, an education-department official said. Test dates would be moved from October to May.

The state board took no action on the plan when it was presented. Legislation may be required to implement some of the changes, officials noted. If approved, the changes would be in place by the fall of 1994.

■ **The South Carolina Board of Education has given preliminary approval to a measure that would encourage a "moment of silent meditation" in public schools.**

The measure, adopted this month, replaces a proposal endorsed by the board in December that encouraged prayer in schools. The December proposal was amended after complaints that it had been adopted without public comment. The board will take a second and final vote on the silent-meditation measure in March.

The resolution states that public-school children "need the inspiration, motivation, and discipline of the religious values on which our country was founded."

In a related matter, a bill that calls for one minute of silent prayer at the beginning of the school day has been sponsored by more than half of the members of the state's House of Representatives. ■

DISTRICTS

Bronx Racial Attacks on Youths Lead to Increased School Security

Extra police officers were posted at every junior high and high school in the Bronx borough of New York City last week following the second race-related attack on a school-age child in the area in less than a week.

City police were calling the second attack, against a 12-year-old Hispanic boy, a "copy-cat" crime because it so closely resembled the assault the week before on a 12-year-old black boy and his 14-year-old sister. In both incidents, groups of white teenagers or young adults were reported to have screamed racial slurs as they beat their victims and smeared white paint on the victims' faces. Neither assault occurred on school grounds.

The second attack especially alarmed police and community leaders because no one at the busy intersection where it took place intervened to help the boy, who was waiting to catch a bus to school.

A New York police spokesman declined to disclose how many extra officers were posted at more than 60 Bronx schools. He said the officers would stay on duty at the schools as long as they were needed.

■ **Students in Roman Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee generally outperformed students in the city's public schools in standardized-test scores and grade-point averages,** but black students in the Catholic schools ranked below white students in either system, according to a study by the Milwaukee public schools.

The study compared the reading- and mathematics-test scores of Catholic and public-school students in the 5th and 7th grades. White Catholic-school students outperformed white public-school students in three of the four categories. Black Catholic-school students outperformed black public-school students in all categories, but scored below white public-school students in each breakdown.

A comparison of all public-school 10th-grade pupils with 10th graders who had transferred from Catholic schools in the 9th grade showed that the transfer students outperformed the entire test group in reading and mathematics.

Black transfer students outperformed other black students in both reading and mathematics, but they scored below the total for all white students in the system.

The study also showed that a higher percentage of former Catholic-school students, compared with the overall public-school population, went on to graduate from the public system with a grade-point average of 2.5 or better.

The study, prepared by the Milwaukee school system's research office, concludes that the achievement differences "should not be used to make judgments about the relative qualities of the educational programs in the two school systems."

■ **A federal appeals court has ruled that the school board of a Texas district acted properly in the 1988 firing of its superintendent after he criticized the board's president.**

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled 13 to 2 this month that Superintendent Nolan Kinsey's pointed remarks in the midst of a school-board election rendered his relationship with the board ineffective. The court said that the administrator's comments overstepped the boundaries of the First Amendment's free-speech guarantee.

The federal court's ruling also overturned a jury's award of $250,000 in an earlier ruling against the Salado Independent School District. ■

PEOPLE

■ Four superintendents have been chosen as finalists in the National Superintendent of the Year program sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators.

They are: **Robert L. Henley**, superintendent of the 11,070-student Independence (Mo.) Public Schools; **Donald W. Ingwerson**, superintendent of the 92,000-student Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools; **Jean B. McGrew**, superintendent of the 4,025-student Northfield Township (Ill.) High School District; and **Karen C. Woodward**, superintendent of the 10,700-student Anderson (S.C.) School District.

The winner will be announced Feb. 21 at the A.A.S.A.'s convention in San Diego.

■ Four finalists have been named in the National Teacher of the Year program sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers.

They are: **Maria Azucena Vigil**, a kindergarten teacher at Las Lomas Elementary School in La Habra, Calif.; **Thomas A. Fleming**, a secondary special-education teacher at Washtenaw County Juvenile Detention School in Ann Arbor, Mich.; **Marion Lipinski**, a 5th-grade teacher at the Center Street Village School in Mentor, Ohio; and **Rosa E. Lujan**, a 5th- and 6th-grade bilingual-education teacher at Ysleta Elementary School in El Paso, Tex.

The winner will be announced at a White House ceremony in early April.

■ **Richard L. Thompson**, the superintendent of education in Mississippi, has been appointed director of the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching.

The center is an autonomous statewide program of the University of North Carolina system. Outstanding precollegiate teachers in the state attend weeklong seminars at the center, which is designed to provide renewal experiences and keep quality teachers in the profession.

■ The rock star **Prince** has pitched in money to help the Chicago educator **Marva Collins** buy a new facility to train teachers in her methods of teaching the classics to disadvantaged children.

Using Prince's donation, Ms. Collins has purchased a former elementary school in Park Forest, Ill. Currently, teachers attend the 10-month program at Ms. Collins's private school on the city's West Side. ■

DIMENSIONS

The Recession and Children

A majority of registered voters believe that children today are worse off than when their own generation was growing up, a new national survey concludes.

The survey, conducted by Kids Count, a joint project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, found that 55 percent of 1,000 registered voters polled in mid-December agreed that the economic recession was making life worse for children.

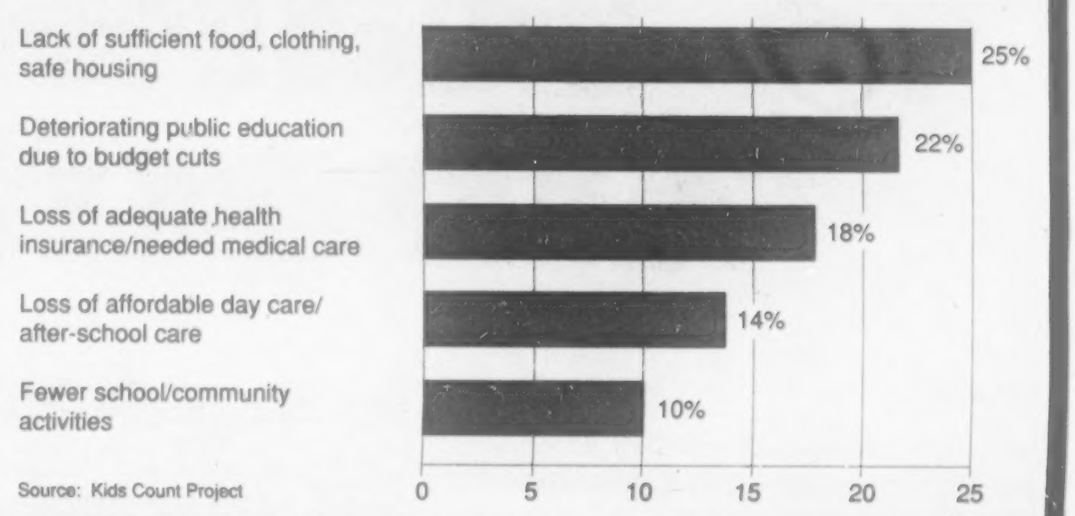
"Children have become the first casualty of the nation's economic downturn," said Douglas W. Nelson, the executive director of the Casey Foundation.

Many of the respondents said the recession had led to a deterioration in the quality of public education; 22 percent listed poorer education as the biggest effect of the recession on children, and 19 percent termed it the second biggest such effect.

Respondents also agreed that the recession had led to fewer school and community activities for children.

The voters surveyed endorsed guaranteed health insurance for children, more family-oriented business practices, a tax credit for families with children, and increased spending for precollege education as measures to counteract the effects of the recession on children.

Voters' Views of How The Recession Has Affected Children



Source: Kids Count Project

UPDATE

■ **The Waterbury (Conn.) Board of Education has proposed to increase involuntary busing for racial balance to satisfy state officials who previously had insisted the district ease segregation by building a new school.** *(See Education Week, Nov. 20, 1991.)*

A plan announced by the board this month calls for the 7,400-student district to bus an additional 140 students to help racially balance its schools, according to Guy N. DiBiasio, the district's superintendent.

In all, about 7 percent of the district's students will be transferred to other schools to comply with state orders that it be racially balanced by Sept. 1, Mr. DiBiasio said.

The school board had proposed building a new school to ease segregation, but city officials had refused to fund the project.

When the state took the city to court over the issue last year, a superior-court judge ruled that the city could not be forced to build a new school, but that the district still had to come up with a desegregation plan.

■ **A group of parents in Philadelphia has filed suit charging that the school district's condom-distribution policy is illegal and would cause "irreparable harm."**

The advocacy group Parents United for Better Schools, together with parents of seven high-school students, filed the suit in common-pleas court last week. The parents are seeking a permanent injunction against the program, which began in three city high schools in December.

The suit contends that the state requires parents to give permission for their children to receive health services in schools. Under Philadelphia's policy, students may receive condoms unless their parents specifically exempt them from the program in writing.

The suit also charges that the policy "endangers the welfare of minors" by leading to increased sexual activity among students.

School officials had no comment.

■ **Philadelphia's year-old school-business collaboration has received its first "report card" from the coalition of businesses that sponsored it, and it won high marks in four of six target areas.**

The business group lauded the district's progress in improving standardized-test scores, promotion rates, high-school credit accumulation, and student-attendance rates.

On the remaining two performance indicators, teacher attendance remained stable at 93.8 percent and students' mathematical-computation scores dropped slightly.

The report card was the first annual evaluation in a five-year collaborative improvement plan developed last year by the school district and the Committee to Support the Philadelphia Public Schools. *(See Education Week, Jan. 16, 1991.)* By 1995, school administrators have pledged to meet six performance targets, while area business leaders have promised to secure an additional $86 million in state funding and to create more jobs for high-school graduates.

A year ago, the pact was praised as one of the most comprehensive in the nation.

Although the improvements on national exams represented only 10 percent of the gains stipulated in the five-year objectives, increases in the other indicators ranged from 24 percent to 43 percent of the 1995 goals.

So far, businesses have promised 370 jobs, and hired 130 graduates. Employers would need to extend 400 offers annually to meet their goal of 2,000 new positions by 1995.

Calling the results "a good running start," the committee's chairman, Terrence A. Larsen, attributed the gains to the implementation of school-based management in district schools, the project's main reform strategy. ■

Tools of Learning

Robert Lisak

At the Eli Whitney Museum in Hamden, Conn., an exhibit of Erector Sets and other industrial Age toys designed by the A.C. Gilbert Company gives Nintendo-era children a chance to learn firsthand about how things work.

At 50, Equivalency Exam Faces Changes in Schools

Continued from Page 1

Chief State School Officers, "the G.E.D. is going to have to adjust its content and approaches to ensure that it measures national standards."

"There can only be one standard for completion of high school," Mr. Selden argued. "There's got to be a single set of national standards. The G.E.D. has got to be part of the system."

At the same time, others note, the move in many schools toward providing students more flexibility in how they demonstrate academic competence could encourage states and districts to allow high-school students on the verge of dropping out to take the G.E.D. before they are scheduled to graduate. Such use of the test is currently authorized in seven states on a pilot basis.

Officials from the G.E.D. Testing Service of the American Council on Education, which runs the program in conjunction with state education departments, say the high-school-equivalency program will adapt to whatever changes in secondary education emerge from the current round of reforms.

Still, the G.E.D. program and any new national system of assessments appear certain to maintain their distinct identities.

Although one state—Oklahoma—has proposed using the G.E.D. as a high-school exit examination, G.E.D. officials and observers agree that the equivalency test is unlikely to replace high-school student assessments any time soon.

Likewise, the proposed national assessments are unlikely to replace the G.E.D. The program, Mr. Selden said, will probably remain true to its 50-year-old mission of providing a second chance for adults who lack high-school diplomas—currently an estimated 50 million Americans.

"The G.E.D. is a culture," Mr. Selden said. "It has a lot of proud participants and adherents. They would continue to prefer to use it as a test, even if it is deemed equivalent to other tests available."

Origins in the Military

Although a forerunner of the G.E.D. concept dates back to World War I, the program got under way in 1942, when officials from the U.S. military sought a way to ease the return of servicemen and servicewomen to civilian life.

Toward that end, Cornelius Turner, a former school superintendent assigned to the U.S. Armed Forces Institute in Madison, Wis., worked on developing a test that would enable outgoing military personnel without high-school diplomas to demonstrate high-school-level knowledge and skills in order to be eligible for enrollment at the institute or a civilian college.

Working with some of the leading testing experts of the time—including Ralph Tyler of the University of Chicago and E.F. Lindquist of the University of Iowa—Mr. Turner developed what he called the "General Educational Development" tests. Such tests, he said, would measure the lasting outcomes of schooling, such as the ability to comprehend and to think, rather than recall of specific facts.

After World War II, Mr. Turner, who joined the American Council on Education, a Washington-based association of colleges and universities, sought to extend the G.E.D. program to the civilian sector. In 1947, he persuaded the New York State Department of Education to certify high-school dropouts who passed the test as having the equivalent of a high-school diploma. Other states soon followed suit.

By 1963, when California adopted the program, it had spread to all 50 states and all the U.S. territories. In 1969, it began in each of the Canadian provinces as well.

Currently, about 700,000 adults take the test each year, and about two-thirds of these earn diplomas. In 1990, one-eighth of all the high-school diplomas issued in the United States—431,225—were through the G.E.D. program.

Ronald Gillum, the director of adult extended education for the Michigan Department of Education, said he expected the recession to increase the number of test takers.

"In a downturn, there is always a rush to go back to school," he said. "Here in an industrial state with auto factories, a huge number of individuals were working for long periods of time in good jobs without diplomas. Now, faced with the prospect of layoffs, they go back [to school]."

Although many G.E.D. candidates go directly into the job market, an increasing proportion—a record 56 percent in 1990—indicate that they plan to pursue further education. A number of G.E.D.-diploma holders have gone on to prominent careers, among them Gov. James J. Florio of New Jersey, the entertainer Bill Cosby, and the chocolate-chip-cookie entrepreneur Wally (Famous) Amos.

Some Employers, Colleges Wary

As Cornelius Turner had intended, many, though not all, employers and higher-education institutions regard the G.E.D. certificate as the equivalent of a high-school diploma.

In fact, according to Esther F. Schaeffer, the senior vice president of the National Alliance of Business, many employers would prefer to hire a candidate with a G.E.D. over one with a regular diploma.

"They know [G.E.D. graduates] have met certain standards, they have skills," she said. "You can't be sure of that with a diploma."

But Ms. Schaeffer acknowledged that some employers are hesitant to hire workers with a G.E.D. certificate, because the credential indicates that the candidate at one time failed to complete school.

"What does an employer look for? Some sense of stick-to-it-ive-ness," Ms. Schaeffer said. "The G.E.D. is some indication [the prospective employee] didn't stick with it."

One large employer that takes that attitude is, ironically, the U.S. armed services, the agency that started the program.

Although the military does not have a policy against accepting recruits with a G.E.D. diploma, the services prefer those who have a regular diploma, according to Lieut. Col. Doug Hart, a Pentagon spokesman. Some studies have found that recruits who completed high school in the normal way tend to have a lower attrition rate than those with "alternative credentials," Colonel Hart said.

College-admissions officials are also divided over whether to accept recipients of a G.E.D. certificate.

Linda Clement, the director of admissions at the University of Maryland at College Park, said that her experience has shown that "subscores on the G.E.D. are a good predictor of success freshman year."

As a result, she said, her campus—the flagship of the Maryland system—is "generous" in admitting students with G.E.D. diplomas.

Ms. Clement noted, however, that the University of Maryland's practice is not universal. A study by one of her graduate students, she said, found that several flagship campuses elsewhere view admissions of G.E.D. holders as "exceptions."

But such attitudes may be changing as colleges seek older students to compensate for the shrinking pool of 18- to 24-year-olds, said Frank Burtnett, the executive director of the National Association of College Admission Counselors. On many campuses, older adults number a fourth of total enrollment, he said.

"Some of these people are people who have had to reconstruct their portfolios," Mr. Burtnett said. "They stopped out, or dropped out, along the way."

Yielding Benefits?

Perhaps as a result of the divergent practices of employers and college-admissions officials, researchers have offered conflicting views on the success of G.E.D. holders.

A well-publicized study by two University of Chicago economists, for example, concluded that those with G.E.D. diplomas fared little better economically than high-school dropouts.

The study, published last fall as a "working paper" by the National Bureau of Economic Research Inc., found that people with G.E.D. diplomas earned wages no higher than those without diplomas who had the same number of years of schooling. The wages of both groups, the study found, were far below those of high-school graduates.

But Janet Baldwin, the assistant director for policy research of the G.E.D. Testing Service, criticized the Chicago researchers' study as flawed. She said, for example, that it was based on a small, unrepresentative sample of G.E.D.-diploma holders.

In addition, Ms. Baldwin said, the study examined only young men ages 25 and 28. Since the average age of G.E.D.-certificate earners is 26, she pointed out, such people have had fewer years of post-diploma experience on the job than high-school graduates, who typically earn a diploma at age 18.

As a better study, Ms. Baldwin cited a forthcoming analysis by Hal Beder, a Rutgers University researcher.

In that study, Mr. Beder, an associate professor of adult education at Rutgers's graduate school of education, examined the careers of Iowa G.E.D.-diploma holders 2, 5, and 10 years after earning their diplomas. He found that, in nearly every case, the G.E.D. earners gained on virtually every economic measure—includ-

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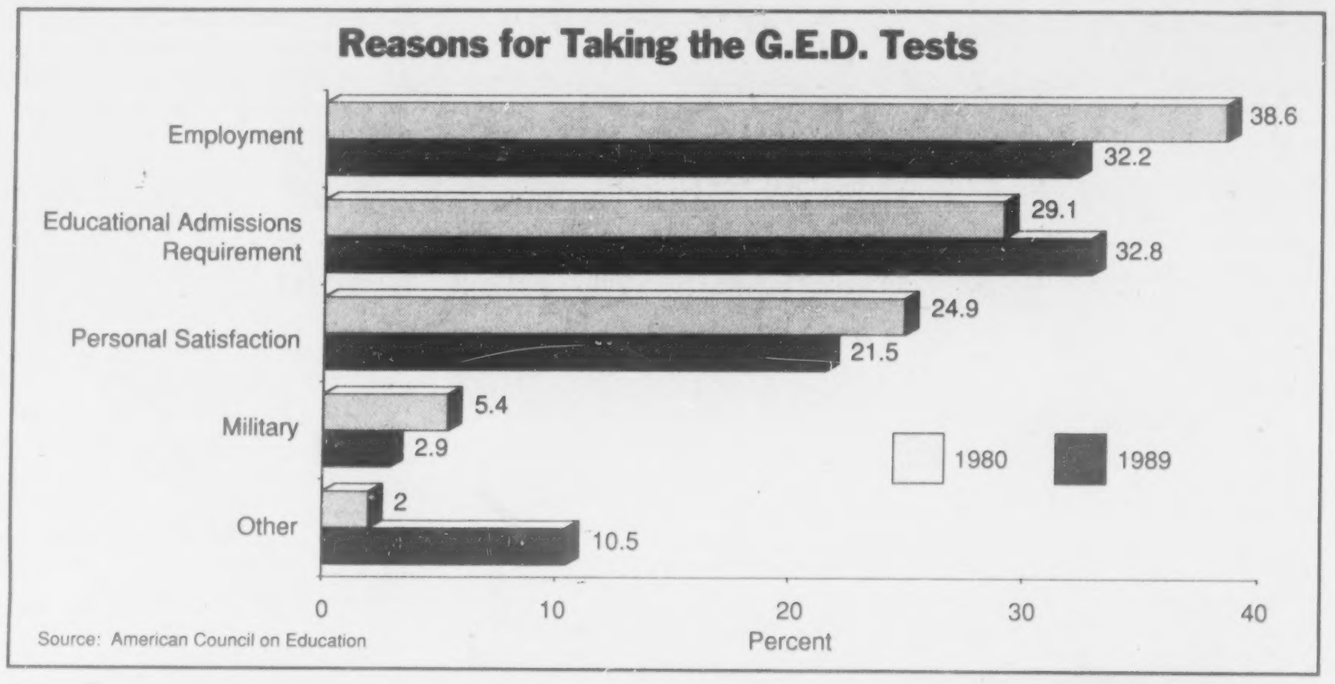

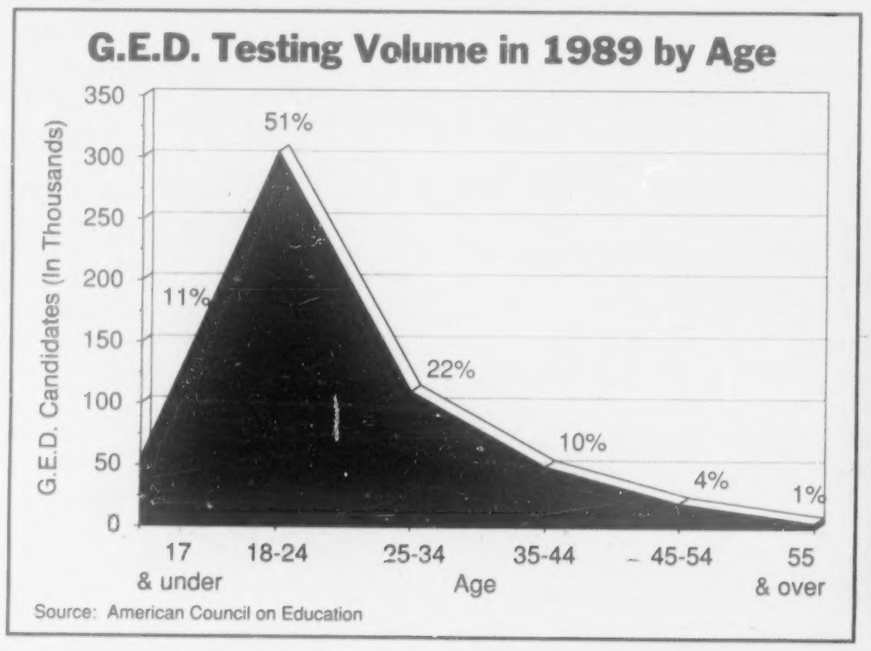

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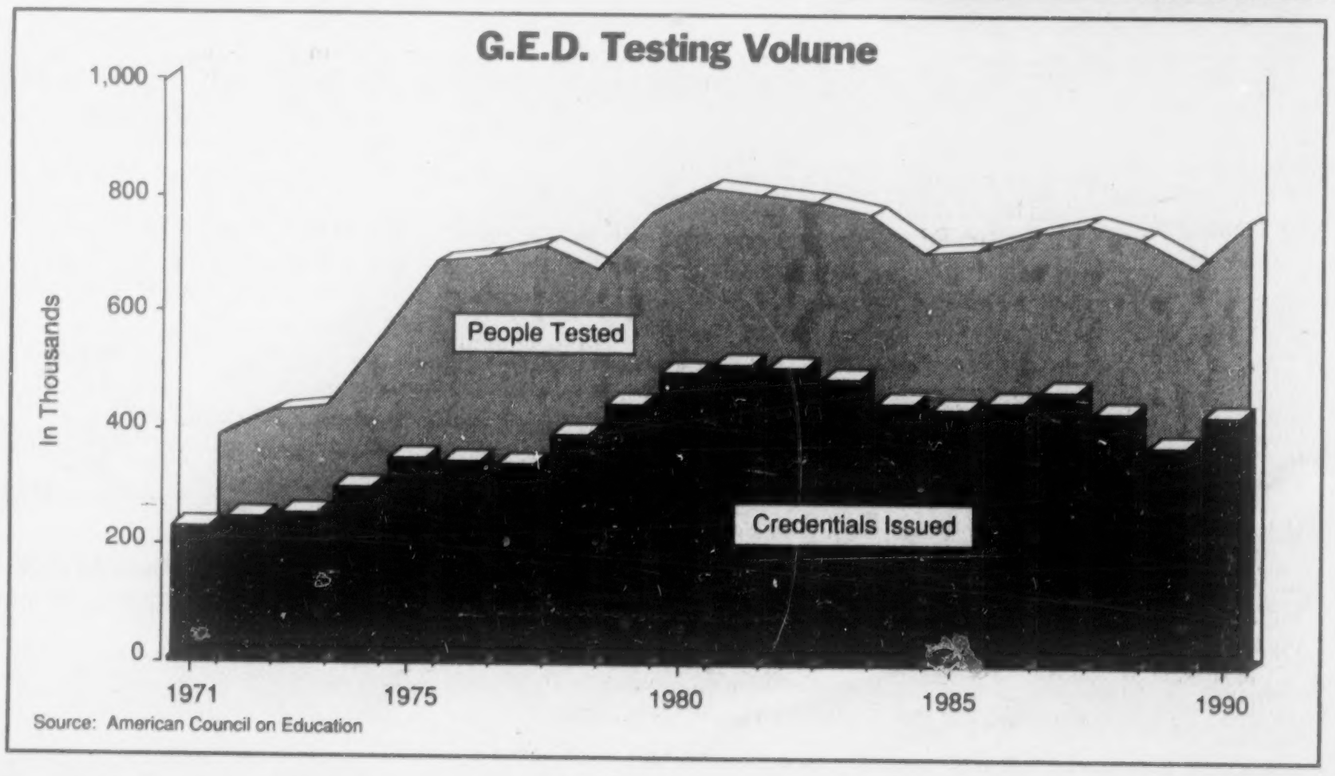

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ing job satisfaction, skill levels, the number of hours worked per week, acquisition of property, job benefits, and savings—and that the gains increased over time.

"Earning the G.E.D. does yield benefits, although it is not a quick fix," Mr. Beder said. "It does not yield some short-term benefit that decreases. It accrues over time with substantial interest."

Mr. Beder acknowledged that his study does not compare the economic gains of G.E.D. holders with those of dropouts and high-school graduates. But he noted that those with a G.E.D. certificate outperformed the statewide average on every economic indicator.

Higher Standards Predicted

But even if the G.E.D. leads to success in the current job market, it may not do so in the future, when skill levels will be more demanding, according to Ms. Schaeffer of the National Alliance of Business.

"Right now, the G.E.D. tries to capture what the state feels a high-school student should know," she said. "I don't think that's nearly high enough for the workplace of the future."

But the move to set high standards for students to meet such future requirements will almost surely lead to higher standards for the G.E.D., most observers agree.

"If standards are going up for high-school kids, the G.E.D. will want to have the test comparable to" such standards, said Betsy Brand, the assistant U.S. secretary of education for adult and vocational education.

Jean H. Lowe, the director of the G.E.D. Testing Service, said that the way the test is designed ensures that it matches standards for high-school seniors. Although in previous years the American Council on Education contracted out the development of the G.E.D., since 1988 the test has been developed in-house.

As each test is created, Ms. Lowe said, the testing service invites high-school teachers to review every test question to make sure that the test reflects actual high-school curricula.

In addition, she said, the test is administered each year to a sample of high-school seniors; minimum passing scores are set so that 30 percent of the seniors would fail the test.

"If schools change, yes, we will change," Ms. Lowe said. "But we do not know yet what that [change] will be."

Doubts in Oklahoma

Because of the close alignment of the G.E.D.'s content with high-school curricula, some educators have proposed that G.E.D. officials drop their traditional resistance to the tests' use in school and allow states and districts to administer the examination to high-school students.

Last year, for example, Oklahoma's superintendent of public instruction, Sandy Garrett, won approval from the A.C.E.'s commission on educational credit and credentials to allow the state to consider using the equivalency test as a high-school exit exam. *(See Education Week, April 3, 1991.)*

Ms. Garrett said the move was prompted by a legislative mandate to impose an exit test beginning in 1992, even though the state had planned to revise its curriculum in the 1993-94 school year.

"You can't assess boys and girls on the new curriculum on the graduation test," she pointed out. "It's not developed yet."

The G.E.D., Ms. Garrett said, could be used in the interim to provide "baseline data" on student performance. "I feel confident in the G.E.D. as a comprehensive measure," she said.

But lawmakers objected to the Oklahoma superintendent's plan, in part because they considered the G.E.D. test not rigorous enough. In response, they adopted legislation to delay the test mandate.

That legislation was vetoed for unrelated reasons, and the legislature is expected to reconsider the issue early this year. Ms. Garrett said some lawmakers may push for the use of the G.E.D. as an interim test. "The G.E.D. is not ruled out," she said.

Not 'Minimum Competency'

Mr. Selden of the state chiefs' organization said the Oklahoma legislators' objections to the G.E.D. reflected a widespread misconception about the test.

"People think it's a lower-level, minimum-competency test, not a full-fledged test to the equivalence of secondary-level standard," Mr. Selden said. In fact, he said, the test contents "are comprehensive, substantive, and rigorous."

The seven-and-a-half-hour test covers the major areas of the high-school curriculum: science, social studies, literature, and mathematics. Although the test hews largely to a multiple-choice format, Mr. Selden noted, it added a writing assessment in 1988 and revised its questions to focus more on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.

The questions tend to focus on real-world contexts that adults confront, Ms. Lowe said. For example, questions about civics might ask about voting or school-board meetings.

The misconceptions about the G.E.D. stem in part from the test-taking population, Ms. Lowe suggested. In fact, she said, only 6 percent of G.E.D. test takers in a 1989 survey said they left school for academic reasons; three-fourths said they had a C average or better in high school.

In addition, the survey found that 84 percent of the test takers had studied an average of 30.5 hours for the test. State education departments, with funding from the federal adult-education programs, offer G.E.D.-preparation programs.

"People think because dropouts can take and pass it, it's not difficult," Ms. Lowe said. "That's not true."

The Wrong Signal?

In addition to the Oklahoma proposal, seven states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin—have launched efforts to administer the G.E.D. to current high-school students.

Under these pilot programs, school officials identify students who are at risk of dropping out of school and who appear likely to be able to pass the G.E.D. They then enroll them in a training program to prepare for the equivalency exam.

Carolyn M. Klein, the director of the pilot program for the Texas Education Agency, said it is aimed at those she called the "academically fragile": able students who are considering dropping out of school for personal or other reasons.

But the program, which has been operating in 200 school districts over the past two years, has had "mixed" results, according to Ms. Klein.

Some 40 percent of the participants drop out of school before taking the G.E.D. test, she noted. However, of those who remain and take the test, nearly all have received their G.E.D. diplomas. And most of those students said they would have dropped out of school if the program had not been available.

"If they leave, and we try to capture them as adults, we'd lose them," Ms. Klein said.

Despite such successes, some educators remain leery of the program, according to Ms. Brand of the U.S. Education Department.

Critics say it is a "signal to kids that they can take a test that some people view as a shortcut to getting out of school," she said.

But Timothy J. Dyer, the executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, said options like the G.E.D. program for at-risk youths will become increasingly common as educators look for alternatives to current "seat time" requirements.

Although educators consider the "whole high-school experience" valuable, he said, many also argue that what matters is that students are able to demonstrate competence in academic subjects.

"If you can demonstrate mastery of algebra," Mr. Dyer said, "why take an algebra course?"

"That needs to be in the reform debate," he said.

Officials from the G.E.D., for their part, say their primary mission should remain, as it has for half a century, to serve adults who lack high-school credentials.

"We would like nothing better in the world than if the dropout rate were zero," Ms. Baldwin of the G.E.D. Testing Service said.

For now, she added, "There are 50 million adults without diplomas. We have many, many lifetimes to go [to serve that group]."

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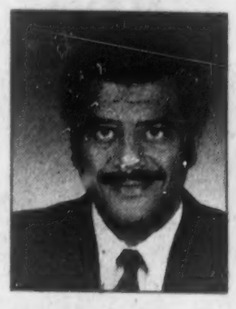

By Bernard R. Gifford, Ph.D.
Vice President, Education
Apple Computer, Inc.

Last night I stayed up late working on a speech about the "productivity paradox"—why, despite the rapid proliferation of computer technology in the last decade, we haven't seen a dramatic rise in productivity.

My family was already asleep when I shut off the computer, so I began the nightly ritual. I doused the lights in each room, pushed the off button on the CD player, switched on the security system, turned on the telephone answering machine, and set the timer for our morning coffee.

As I listened to the refrigerator's steady hum in the dark kitchen, I thought about how pervasive electric power has become in our lives: We use it to do everything from roasting our potatoes to ridding our teeth of excess plaque. It is hard to imagine that anyone could ever have doubted its utility or its impact on daily life. But in fact, it took decades for electricity to transform the home. When Thomas Edison began fabricating light bulbs in the 1880s, no one imagined how profoundly his invention would permeate American life.

In *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology*, David E. Nye explores this time lag, analyzing the kinds of changes a society must undergo before it can be transformed by technology.

Nye describes how, in the last years of the nineteenth century, entrepreneurs illuminated store windows, extending the shopping day and drawing awestruck crowds downtown to see the lights. In 1880, the town of Wabash, Indiana, installed four 3,000-candle arc lights on its courthouse, and the *Wabash Plain Dealer* rejoiced: "Men fell on their knees, groans were uttered at the sight, and many were dumb with amazement."

Electricity was readily accepted as a force that could alter public life—the things said and done in floodlit town squares, hotels, theaters, department stores, and clubs. But years passed before electricity was harnessed to transform *private* lives. The lights went on in public places and mansions in the 1880s, Nye notes, but most houses were not wired until after 1915. And it wasn't just a question of creating an infrastructure—stringing wire and retooling homes. We Americans apparently needed years to change our ways of thinking about ourselves and our relationships to one another.

It took decades for us to accept the notion that technology might change our habits or widen our choices; that electric lights might give us more illuminated hours in which to read, work, and socialize; or that time-saving machines might liberate women from domestic drudgery.

Even after homeowners accepted the practical advantages of electric lighting, functionality was not their chief concern. "For a generation," Nye tells us, "it remained an expensive novelty, displayed prominently in the most public rooms of the house..." For decades, the most popular form of domestic electrification was the lights on the Christmas tree.

The electrification of America proceeded slowly but surely. And the computerization of America appears to be moving along in about the same way. After all, as Nye stresses, "Every new technology is a social construction, and the terms of its adoption are culturally determined."

I suspect that in the year 2020, we'll look back and wonder why it took so long for those short-sighted folks of the late twentieth century to move forward on technology. We'll wonder why it took so long to create new kinds of information-based organizations, to build adequate electronic data highways, or to profit from educational technologies.

As in the early days of electrification, Americans have accepted the power of the computer to transform public lives. But we have underestimated its impact on private lives. And the experts haven't done much better. Pioneers such as John von Neumann, who worked on the famous JOHNNIAC computer at Princeton half a century ago, thought of computers as huge, costly, rare machines that would forever reside in mammoth institutions. In the 1950s, the crystal-ball readers at IBM predicted that the worldwide market for computers would demand only a grand total of ten machines.

Even scientists failed to predict that instead of getting bigger and bigger, computers would get smaller and smaller—not to mention cheaper and cheaper. They did not foresee the astonishingly rapid diffusion of personal computers into our homes and schools.

Today, homes and schools are where the most profound and surprising technological developments are likely to occur. As Nye points out, for the typical American "electrification was not an abstract process, but a series of choices." Once we chose to embrace the new technology in our homes, we began to put it to unpredictable uses. For example, we used refrigerators not just to store food, but also "to hide money in fake cabbages, to protect photographic film, to give nylon stockings longer life, to allow pet snakes to hibernate, and to preserve drugs." He concludes that "tools or technologies bought for a certain clearly defined use develop other meanings over time as part of lived experience."

In homes, schools, and universities all over the nation, Americans are inventing new applications for the personal computer every hour of every day. In the hands of so many inspired, intelligent people, who knows what age-old problems our new technologies might solve.